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ABSTRACT

Although school districts with under 2,500 students represent three-quarters of all school districts and enroll about 19% of all students, few institutions of higher education have programs designed specifically for rural education. Results of a survey of administrative heads of the department/school/college of education of 24 such institutions in 23 states with a substantial rural population indicate that there is little evidence of availability of programs for educating teachers to develop the specific competencies required for teaching in small or rural schools, and that a limited number of institutions address the specific needs of rural educators with in-service and graduate education programs. A summary of responses names resource concerns, political and bureaucratic constraints, commitment and responsibility concerns, and knowledge/research concerns as barriers to meeting the needs of educational personnel in rural/small schools. To eliminate those barriers, institutions should (1) commit themselves to the development of personnel; (2) assign the overall responsibility for a rural education effort to a person or unit within the institution; (3) internally redirect resources; and (4) foster cooperative relationships and mutual support among colleges of education, state departments of education, teacher and administrator organizations, school boards, and other school/community-based organizations. (CM)

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Higher Education's Response to the Needs of Rural Schools

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Higher Education's Response to the Needs of Rural Schools

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Traditionally, higher education's major thrusts have been teaching, research and service. With the new or renewed interest in rural education across the country, institutions of higher education and particularly departments/schools/colleges of education are being asked to be a part of this ground swell of interest. Unfortunately, the presence or the importance of their role in this effort is not universally recognized by many such institutions that tend to serve large segments of rural America.

In fact, few institutions have programs that are designed specifically for rural education, and some even indicated that they would never develop such an effort, because of its inappropriateness. This paper will attempt to briefly review the needs in rural education and will summarize several programs/practices, barriers, and a suggested plan for a comprehensive approach for an institution of higher education. The following comments are somewhat limited since they are primarily restricted to the domain of education units in colleges/universities.

The educational needs in rural areas are probably broad, but are not well defined. Small schools seem to have recognized the risk in reporting problems or deficiencies. The risk is simply that they will be consolidated with one or more other districts on the premise that this provides solutions

to educational problems or it is more cost effective. As found in an article by Edington (1980, pp. C-2),Paul Erwin, an analyst in the Education and Public Welfare Division of the Congressional Research Service, noted, "The small school districts with enrollments of under 2,500 pupils may represent a special rural education problem." They represent some three-quarters of all school districts and enroll about 19 percent of all students. To some even a school district with 2,500 students is quite large. For example, in Montana, third class district elementary schools (the smallest state classification) and high schools of 100 or fewer pupils collectively comprise 45 percent of all schools (Zetler, 1980). Erwin goes on to say, "In comparison with national averages, these smaller districts have higher expenditures per pupil, they spend more for administration of pupil transportation, participate less frequently in federal educational programs and have lower pupil-teacher ratios." While general education performance for these school districts appears to be unavailable, it is reported in an ERIC/CRESS Fact Sheet entitled "Rural Education--Reading Achievement in Rural Areas" that at least one million United States teenagers (aged 12 to 17) cannot read at the beginning fourth grade level, and that only in extreme inner city schools are students more likely to have reading difficulties than in extreme rural and small schools. In this same article, it is suggested that the harshness of social and economic conditions in the rural environment contributes to learning problems in all disciplines.

A special edition of the newsletter distributed by the National Rural Project at Murray State University was devoted to what was termed as a national problem, recruitment and retention of specialized personnel in rural areas. Even at this time, small school districts in the plains and mountain western states are reporting shortages of secondary teachers for science, industrial arts, foreign language, mathematics and agricultural

education. Generally, the greater shortages are found in the more sparsely populated section of these states.

In-service education and advanced studies in off-campus locations are less frequently available in rural areas. Usually, these are made available by colleges/universities through their extension or continuing education programs. Since most states support extension or continuing education at less than actual costs, these classes must be self supporting, and rural areas can only infrequently provide an adequate enrollment. The offerings tend to be more general, and it is very difficult to address the needs of secondary teachers or for that matter other specialized groups, such as counselors, administrators, etc. Ivan Muse (1980), writing in The Interstate Compact for Education, identified several factors related to the rural school and to the economic and social factors pertaining to teachers in rural areas.

Rural School Factors

Teachers typically have three to five preparations daily in different subjects.

Teachers often teach a class or two in an area in which they are not adequately trained.

Teachers often are expected to take extra-curricular assignments.

Junior and senior high schools often are combined. Teachers may teach junior and senior high school students. Classes such as home economics, physical education, shop, etc. are often made up of students from two or three grade levels.

Budgets are not as good as in urban areas and supplies are not always readily available.

Rural Economic and Social Factors

Teacher salaries usually are much lower than urban salaries.

Teachers are less apt to receive inservice training during the school year and must travel considerable distances or live away from home to receive advanced degrees.

Housing often is not high quality and choice is limited.

Services are limited. Teachers generally must travel many miles to city areas to shop or attend special social events.

With regard to problem areas that may be at least partially addressed by institutions of higher education, the Rural Education Initiative: A Report on the Regional Rural Roundtables (Jacobsmeyer, 1980) included the following recommendations.

- develop relevant curricula for rural schools
- provide technical assistance to rural schools in order for them to compete with urban schools for competitive funds
- assess rural needs
- provide resources for establishing specialized rural pre-service and inservice training programs
- collect data on small rural districts
- conduct research in rural schools

In a National Institute of Education document entitled Improving Rural Schools by Paul Nachtigal (1980), he indicated that for one to improve rural schools reality must be accepted.

- Accepting the fact that rural communities and schools are different from urban communities and schools.

- Accepting the fact that rural communities differ from each other and that interventions to improve rural education must recognize those differences.
- Accepting the fact that rural schools and rural communities operate as a single, integrated social structure.
- Accepting the fact that doing things to or for rural communities is inconsistent with rural tradition.

While this does not provide an exhaustive description of the needs and conditions that are found in the rural or small schools, it does provide a basic look at what is being said about rural education and the needs.

Current Practices

In an effort to identify exemplary practices that are designed to specifically serve the needs of rural/small schools, a survey form was distributed to the administrative head of the department/school/college of education of 40 institutions of higher education in 28 states that were thought to have a substantial rural population. Replies were received from 24 insitutions, representing 23 states. The respondents indicated that they had practices/programs specifically designed to prepare educational personnel for and/or meet the needs of rural/small schools in the following areas:

33.3% pre-service education
25% in-service education
29.2% graduate education
25% credit workshops/seminars
20.8% non-credit workshops/seminars
37.5% consultative services
29.2% information services

25% research services

29.2% curriculum development services

20.8% grant proposal development services

8.3% other (included Teacher Corps, small school conference, and rural/small school certificate program)

The target groups for which the respondents indicated that in-service programs were available are special education teachers, teachers in small high schools, Native American administrators, county superintendents and the more general groups of teachers and administrators. Among the graduate program areas that were reported were cross-cultural education, policy development, instruction, student personnel administration, elementary and secondary education, community education, administration, and elementary and secondary education. Overall, there appears to be a very limited number of institutions that address the specific needs of rural educators with in-service and graduate education programs. A few respondents indicated that they would "never develop such programs." One can only infer that they feel it is inappropriate to target this group, it is not economical, or it may be politically or educationally unsound.

At the 1980 meeting of the People United for Rural Education (PURE) organization, several midwestern colleges indicated concern and compassion for the need to prepare teachers for rural areas, but there was little evidence presented that indicated substantial progress. Recently, the prospect of developing a multi-institutional rural student teaching center among the Regents' institutions of Kansas was discussed. The original proposal was developed by Kansas State University, and it was planned for the southwestern part of the state. Although a minority of the six

institutions opposed it, there was limited support for its development except for Kansas State University and Emporia State University. Colorado State University and Brigham Young University are well into teacher education programs in rural areas that seem to be primarily concerned with exposing the undergraduate student to the rural setting. This approach may very well be a reasonable approach, as it attempts to address the attitudinal problem. A unique feature of the Colorado State University program is in regard to in-service education. Undergraduate students take the place of regular teachers in the rural school for a week, and the regular teachers receive in-service training provided by university faculty who are also in the rural community for the week to supervise the activity. Evaluations of this experience by the regular teachers are good, as reflected in letters to the project coordinator.

In the materials received from the respondents to the aforementioned survey, there was little evidence that programs are available for educating teachers to develop specific competencies that are uniquely required for teaching in small or rural schools. A review of the literature related to the preparation of teachers for rural areas was prepared by William N. Dreier (1977, p. 12). It was entitled "Teachers for Rural America - Are They Recognized and Prepared?" and was presented at the 1977 Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society in Madison, Wisconsin. Dreier concluded:

> In general this examination of a sample of AACTE member colleges and universities in the four states of Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska finds a need for rural educators, institutions located in the rural environment, but very little specific preparation of teachers, leaders or administrators for schools in rural America, one-third of the nation.

Returning to the survey of selected institutions of higher education by this writer, the respondents were asked to identify the two most difficult barriers that they must overcome if they are to meet the needs of educational personnel in rural/small schools. A sampling of the responses is listed below.

- distance and geographic location
- funding
- faculty commitment
- perceived risk factor
- lack of faculty time to set aside for work in local district setting
- reward system for faculty to participate in a program
- cultural distances
- departmental inertia
- university regulations which hinder different delivery systems
- geographic turf
- space in the overcrowded undergraduate and graduate curriculums
- ignorance about rural schools - needs, structures, processes
- research base of information for instruction

In summary, all responses seem to fall into one of the following categories.

A. resource concerns (money, time and personnel)

B. commitment and responsibility concerns (individual and institutional)

C. political and bureaucratic constraints

D. knowledge/research concerns

A later question in the survey asked whether the institution had an office or center that was assigned specific responsibility for rural/small schools. A total of eight or 33 percent indicated that they did. In reviewing descriptive brochures about several of the centers, it appears that they are generally service oriented. Research and instruction, at least in terms of organized curricular offerings, are quite secondary in emphasis. For the most part, the centers appear to perceive rural education in a positive light and several have taken steps to improve the image of rural/small schools in the broader society. Examples of this are the positive nature of the themes, sessions and presenters at various conferences, and a multimedia presentation on rural education developed by the Center for Rural Education and Small Schools at Kansas State University.

As stated earlier, there has been a recent rediscovery of rural education. To determine the cause of this interest is not the purpose of this paper, but clearly, in some cases, higher education is a part of the ground swell. From a different perspective, this interest is not universally evident in all institutions, nor does there seem to be a well developed comprehensive effort. The barriers or constraints identified by selected institutions of higher education are very real. The remainder of this paper will describe a suggested approach for an institution to positively respond to the needs of rural/small schools in comprehensive fashion. Of course, each institution's approach must be compatible with its mission and the needs of the area it serves. The suggested approach will be described within the context of four areas, as listed below.

A. Responsibility and Commitment

B. Organization and Functions

C. Resources

D. Cooperative Relationships

Responsibility and Commitment

Higher education, and particularly schools/colleges/departments of education, must commit themselves to the development of personnel for rural and small schools. With the growing discontent with the problems in large inner city schools, out migration of city dwellers and the added costs of consolidation, the smaller schools in rural settings will continue to exist, and a large portion of employment opportunities for educators will be in these schools. If higher education does not assume responsibility for preparing educators for these unique positions, then other agencies or professional organizations will fill the void, or more probably, no one will provide the training. While higher education cites resources, time, crowded curricula and lack of faculty commitment as barriers, there are resources and there are elements available. The administration must just decide to redirect efforts and resources from nonproductive and often unneeded programs.

Organization and Functions

Organizationally, I feel a person or a unit must be charged with the overall responsibility for a rural education effort. While centers give recognition to the institution and offer the possibility of coordinating activities, if they are not in the mainstream of the college and do not have hardline financial support, they have little chance to significantly impact on the instructional program. A center that has not been totally incorporated into the organization can, at best, provide services and

possibly influence individual research efforts.

The traditional functions of teaching, research and service can and should be extended to the area of rural education. I do not wish to infer that rural education is a separate discipline area. Certainly, teaching and administering in a small or rural school is different, and preparation should reflect these differences. However, it is not clear how they are different; therefore, research is needed to provide a basis for preparation of educators, intervention of support programs, and exploiting the advantages of small classes, community support, broad participation in student activities, etc.

Resources

Additional resources to specifically support the maintenance and/or development of programs in rural education are probably not forthcoming for higher education. If there is a local commitment, then resources must be redirected internally. Very likely, this would require modified reward systems, changes in formula budgeting, and the elimination/consolidation of certain programs. Also, faculty would need a different orientation, which would require resources for retraining, replacing faculty and/or the provision of external support personnel or services. Judicious hiring of faculty to replace those who resign and retire would provide a slow, but less upsetting procedure.

At the same time, it must be recognized that work, including inservice education and research, in the rural more sparsely populated areas costs more money and requires more time. Assignments and expectations should reflect these facts. There is little evidence that external funds will be generally available for rural education activities. However, almost all externally funded programs do allow for individual projects to focus

on small and rural schools. The pre-College programs of the National Science Foundation and the special education, bilingual education and migrant education programs of the U.S. Department of Education are examples of this.

Cooperative Relationships

Schools and programs for preparing personnel for small/rural schools are not the domain of one group. The potential impact, both negative and positive, of organizations besides colleges of education is tremendous. Within a college of education, cooperation and a common philosophy among all departments would be greatly advantageous. For example, a common understanding and awareness of program content and methodology among the foundations, methods and field experience areas would certainly enhance the total program of the individual students.

Outside the university and within the state, cooperative relationships and mutual support among colleges of education, state department of education, teacher and administrator organizations, school board associations, and other school/community based organizations seem reasonable. However, there is little research effort devoted to better understanding these relationships and networks and the impact on individual schools.

In rural education, formal and informal networks are only recently developing. Among groups that will probably be instrumental in this regard are the Rural Education SIG in AERA, PURE and the Rural Education Association. Two journals, The Rural Educator and The Small School Forum, have been developed within the last year and a half. These journals have been cooperatively developed by several universities of the central states. Additionally, ERIC/Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (ERIC/CRESS) and the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory are two

agencies that are and hopefully will continue to be vital components of the cooperative efforts in rural education.

In summary, the isolated efforts by higher education in rural education are commendable. However, they appear to be very minor and quite secondary to other more traditional areas by emphasis. The need to study the many aspects of rural education, including the preparation of educators and the delivery of services, is tremendous. Higher education is a logical entity to assume a large share of this responsibility, but for this to occur, it appears that new directions and priorities must be established.

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